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The paradox of higher vocational education: The teaching assistant game, the pursuit of capital and the self

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The paradox of higher vocational education: The teaching assistant game, the pursuit of capital and the self

This article discusses the reasons offered by one group of paraprofessionals to explain their decision to study for a work-related higher education programme. It reports on an ethnographically inspired piece research that aimed to capture the initial motives that a group of teaching assistants had for studying for a Foundation degree at a post-1992 university. This group of students were largely female mature students, who were also overwhelmingly mothers with dependent children. It is suggested that Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, habitus and *illusio* can be utilised to understand why these learners become motivated to enter higher vocational education. Workplace change and the pursuit of capital are highlighted as being a catalyst for the fracturing of *illusio*, career switching and undergraduate study. Somewhat counterintuitively, virtually all the students indicated that they had decided to study for a qualification that was primarily designed to help them succeed in their existing employment role as a means of acquiring a new occupational role and version of self.

Keywords: teaching assistants; Bourdieu; higher vocational education; student-mothers; paraprofessionals; foundation degree

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of school-based teaching assistants in a range of international contexts (Devecchi et al. 2012; Graves and Williams, 2016; Sharma and Salend 2016; Tent 2014). The creation of these posts has been part of a wider expansion of paraprofessional roles across public welfare services including health, social care and education (Webster et al. 2010). OECD countries have experienced a 29% increase in such posts in educational contexts compared with 12%

rise in teaching posts (Edmond and Hayler 2013). In England, the emergence of large numbers of teaching assistants has been exceptionally dramatic (Bedford et al. 2006; Coughlan 2014).

In conjunction with the extensive numerical rise of UK based teaching assistant posts, a major reconfiguration of their workplace duties has occurred (Tucker 2009). Significantly, as part of this process teaching assistants have experienced “role stretch” and “role creep” (Warhurst et al. 2013, 159). Yet in the UK, there is no specialised formal qualification that all teaching assistants must hold. This contrasts with countries such as the United States where it is obligatory for these workers to possess a two-year post-secondary degree or an associate or higher degree (Butt and Lowe 2012). Although Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status has been developed in the UK for those who are contractually being asked to undertake formal classroom teaching under the close supervision of a qualified teacher, it is not in itself a credit bearing award. Higher Level Teaching Assistant qualifications are also delivered below undergraduate level. Moreover, while the UK Department of Education commissioned the development of professional standards for teaching assistants, it subsequently decided to not to endorse these through publication and has left it to others to promote their existence (UNISON et al. 2016). Consequently, these professional standards are non-mandatory and do not have statutory status. The current deregulation of the English school system, especially through academisation, has further diversified and dissolved career consistency amongst teaching assistants.

In the UK, however large numbers of teaching assistants have embarked on non-mandatory undergraduate qualifications in the form of Foundation degrees. These programmes of study have primarily been designed to help such workers meet the challenges of expanding workplace roles. Whilst research has explored the ways that

teaching assistants experience these courses (Tierney and Slack 2005; Morris 2010; Taylor 2014), little detailed analysis has been undertaken of the motives that these workers have for engaging in this form of study. The relative lack of scholarship in this area reflects a paucity of research into why adults decide to access education and training, which De Oliveira Pires (2009 11) has claimed are “seldom known in depth.” More generally, there is also a relative scarcity of research on paraprofessionals understandings of their social situations (Colley and Guéry 2015).

Drawing upon “the triad of concepts that underpins Bourdieu’s theoretical framework” (Kloot 2015, 964); capital, habitus and field, the following article specifically examines teaching assistants’ accounts of their initial motivations for Foundation degree study. It however also draws upon his lesser known concept (Colley and Guéry 2015) of *illusio*, which encompasses an individual’s commitment to and interest in the social “games” that they participate in. Bourdieu’s framework is employed to explore the connections between ambitions to switch career, motives to enter in-service Higher Vocational Education (HiVE) and a desire to repair specific aspects of the individual self. The constraints within which these aspirations can be pursued are similarly interrogated with the aid of a Bourdieusian perspective.

This article asserts that teaching assistants’ choices about Higher Vocational Education can often be inspired and constrained by the ways that these learners experience the social fields of employment and family life. Students’ lived experiences of these often impact on their habitus, *illusio* and ultimately the form of higher education that they decide to access. The analysis that is provided builds upon the work of Helen Colley, which has productively illustrated the worth of employing Bourdieusian theory to explore the views and experiences of paraprofessional groups (Colley 2012; Colley and Guéry 2015).

The teaching assistant role, expanding numbers and role extension

Kerry (2005, 373) explains how the role of being teaching assistant “suffers from a lack of precise definition.” Certainly, it has vastly different meanings in higher education and schools. In Europe and the United States of America, the term teaching assistant is sometimes employed to describe post-graduates who assist the teaching of undergraduate classes in universities (Park 2004). Yet outside higher education, the label teaching assistant is commonly employed to refer to individuals who support the work of school teachers (Vulliamy and Webb 2006).

The expansion in teaching assistant numbers in the UK, as briefly outlined at the start of this article, is part of an international trend which has involved the increasing use of paraprofessionals in schools (Tent 2014; Webster et al. 2010). More generally, these workers have been recognised as being part of a growing “intermediate or associate professional tier” (Edmond 2010, 320) that has emerged within many countries. Workers in this category include paralegals, health care assistants, physician associates and teaching assistants. Notably, Colley and Guéry (2015) argue that policy discourses that stress the need to fully “professionalise” these groups legitimise them and promote their social acceptance. One consequence of this process is that the work of established public sector professionals can be more easily be transferred to less expensive and more compliant workers.

The growth of paraprofessional groups has been identified in a range of countries including France, South Africa, Italy, Canada, Sweden, the USA, Germany, Malta, Iceland, Australia and Hong Kong (Edmond and Hayler 2013; Housesat 2013; Radford et al. 2014; Trent 2014). OECD data in 2009 identified 30 countries as having education systems that included workers who fell into this category (Edmond and Hayler 2013). In

2015, 263,000 teaching assistants FTEs were employed in English state funded schools (DfE 2016).

UK based teaching assistants are overwhelmingly non-graduate females (Gunter and Rayner 2005). Although much of the overall school workforce in England is comprised of women, teaching assistants are a particularly gendered segment. In 2015, 80.1% of the English state-funded school workforce was female compared with 91.5% of those employed as teaching assistants (DfE 2016). Women with dependent school-aged children have also been documented as making up a significant proportion of these workers (Barkham 2008; Moyles and Suschitzky 1997).

Role stretch and role creep

Research from a variety of international contexts has suggested that teaching assistant roles and responsibilities have expanded dramatically (Blatchford et al., 2012; Graves, 2014; Tucker, 2009). Warhurst et al. (2014, 159) for instance have described how their large-scale research into Scottish teaching assistants found that not only had their numbers increased radically, the roles that they were expected to play had been substantially extended. They deftly categorise this process as being one of “role stretch” and “role creep”. Similarly, research in China (Tan 2006), Hong Kong (Trent 2014) and the United States (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle 2010) has found that teaching assistants are increasingly engaging in diverse activities which are significantly beyond those traditionally associated with such roles.

Role stretch amongst teaching assistants has been subjected to considerable criticism. The clouding of established “professional boundaries” (Bach, Kessler, and Heron 2006) has been accused of potentially undermining the “professional jurisdiction” of teachers (Wilkinson 2005), which may ultimately threaten the status of the teaching

profession (Graves 2014; Gunter and Rayner 2005; Thompson 2006). Critics have also claimed that whilst teaching assistants can be successfully deployed to improve the literacy levels for children identified as having a significant learning difficulty, general non-targeted support may not have a productive impact (Farrell et al. 2010). Large scale research which analysed the impact of over 8,000 teaching assistants has similarly indicated that these workers can have a negative effect on children's academic progress, particularly if they have experienced limited training (Webster et al. 2010).

Academic research has documented a variety of educational policies and social trends have combined to produce changes to teaching assistants' roles and numbers, in the UK and elsewhere. These include greater inclusion of SEN pupils within mainstream schools (Radford et al. 2015) and the need for additional language support due to changing patterns of migration and globalisation (Collins and Simco 2006; Trent 2014). In the UK, what became known as the National Agreement (DfES 2003) is often highlighted as being a crucially important in having produced a dramatic expansion of teaching assistant roles and numbers (Morris, 2010; Smith 2017; Tucker 2009). In 2003, this agreement was signed by the then Labour government and teacher unions, apart from the National Union of Teachers. It principally aimed to restructure (remodel) the state school workforce to promote a reasonable work/life balance for teachers. Policy discourses framed remodelling's primary purpose in terms of teacher retention, through reducing their workloads (Wilkinson 2005, 428). One way that this was to be achieved was by extending the range of duties that teaching assistants would undertake as part of their everyday activities. This move involved the transfer of a significant number of low level "routine" tasks from qualified teachers to the teaching assistant workforce (Easton, Wilson, and Sharp 2005; Smith 2012). Even though the National Agreement is no longer

in place, the roles that it promoted continue to be feature of life in many state funded UK schools (Smith 2017).

Research on teaching assistants' reasons for entry to higher education

Edmond (2003) has outlined how role modification amongst teaching assistants has generated new vocationally-related educational opportunities for these workers which have been developed to meet their changing needs. In England, these have included niche local level training, NVQs, Higher Level Teaching Assistant Status and work-based Foundation degrees. Large numbers of mainly newer teaching-led universities have validated the latter (Beaney 2006). These qualifications were launched in 2001 by the UK Labour Government of the time and involve studying 240 undergraduate degree credits (half at level four and half at level five). At their launch, UK policy makers argued that Foundation degrees would provide high “quality” provision whereby academic and work-based learning would be combined to improve students’ workplace practices (Chipperfield 2013). It has been claimed that these qualifications are comparable with the associate degrees that are taught in community colleges in the USA (Robinson 2012; Wilson, Blewitt, and Moody 2005). Similar sub-degree qualifications have also been established in Holland, Canada and France.

The comparatively small body of research that exists on the initial motives that teaching assistants have for deciding to enter Foundation degree study provides important, but in some respects limited and contradictory insights. Tierney and Slack (2005) claim that access to professional development that supports students’ existing teaching assistant roles is a significant attractor. In contrast to this assertion, research involving a larger sample has found that such learners are often motivated by a longer-term aspiration of eventually achieving Qualified Teacher Status and career change

(Morris 2010). Aspirations of career switching have been linked to “the dramatic evolution of paraprofessional roles” and an accompanying “artificial glass ceiling” on teaching assistants’ salaries (Penketh and Goddard 2008, 324). Unfortunately, such research only briefly refers to this single aspect of workplace rewards; pay. The research presented in this article indicates that while this is an important workplace push factor, a lack of access to other forms of recompense are also important. These can be an equally strong catalyst that can lead vocational students to enter higher education.

Interestingly, previous research into the outcomes of Foundation degree study has claimed that the completion of such programmes of study are no guarantee of an increased salary. Woolhouse et al. (2009) studied teaching assistants who had achieved a Foundation degree to assess what they had gained from their studies. Data was gathered via 167 postal questionnaires and six follow-up interviews. Two thirds of students stated that they had not received an enhanced salary. Somewhat regrettably, a third of these graduates claimed that they had acquired additional responsibilities without pay. It could therefore be argued that their studies had reduced the relative economic capital that they received for their labour. In contrast to this negative outcome, more positively Woolhouse et al. (2009) asserted that the Foundation degree students had acquired some valuable social advantage (capital) in the form of accessing support from their student peers.

Importantly, this research also found that many students had experienced difficulties related to feeling comfortable with being in higher education and viewing themselves as genuine students. These experiences were connected to a lack of cultural capital or the possession and subsequent ability to successfully express the culture of societies’ elites (Bourdieu 1984). Higher education’s requirement for a differing set of presuppositions, habits and other social practices, or a “habitus” (Bourdieu 1990, 53) that reflects advantaged social groups, was linked to the challenges that some of the

Foundation degree students had experienced in terms of feeling at ease with higher education. Woolhouse et al. (2009) also asserted that teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study are gendered and reflective of their class location. Motherhood was pinpointed as having had a significant influence on the lived educational experiences of many of the teaching assistants that they studied.

Yet, how these circumstances influenced their initial study choices was not explored. Limited consideration is given to the initial reasons that their interviewees had for entering Foundation degree study. Moreover, while raising interesting questions about Foundation degree study, capital and habitus; Woolhouse et al.'s (2009) work does not provide any substantial exploration of how these might be influenced by the social fields within which they are constructed. From a Bourdieusian perspective, fields are spaces where social interaction occurs and an individual's social positioning within these shape the forms that struggles for capital take.

Woolhouse et al.'s interpretation of Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital is also questionable and problematic. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define social capital as the totality of advantages that an individual or group accesses from enjoying relationships with others who are in advantaged positions. These can provide increased opportunities for social advancement. Woolhouse et al.'s (2009) proposition that student support networks constituted cultural capital seems at odds with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of this phenomenon.

The findings that are presented in the second part of this article suggest that there is need to move beyond Woolhouse et al.'s (2009) focus on capital and habitus to make sense of the perceptions that teaching assistants hold about their experiences of Foundation degree study. Bourdieu's concepts of field and illusion, for instance, can be usefully drawn upon to make sense of the motives that teaching assistants have when

deciding to enter higher education. Whereas field focuses analysis upon the social contexts where interaction occurs, *illusio* as was discussed earlier in this article describes the commitment of an individual to the “games” that they play within fields (Colley 2012).

Methods of data collection and analysis

This article draws upon a piece of research that was conducted between 2008 and 2015. Although this investigation did not formally adopt an ethnographic format (Aggleton 1987; Ball 1981; Bhatti 2012), its design did draw upon key aspects of this approach (Trowman 2006). Data collection was for example largely qualitative and took place over several years. Alongside a relatively long period of data collection, multiple methods were employed (interviewing, observations and detailed analysis of documents). Priority was also given to the understandings that students held. Theory was developed, tested and refined as data collection proceeded. Ontologically an interpretivist position was adopted, in that it was believed that the social world is socially constructed by individuals and social groups as they interpret and engage with it.

The study also focussed upon one case; a specific higher vocational education programme (Foundation degree) that was targeted at teaching assistants. Primarily, the courses endeavoured to upskill these workers as they undertook increasingly complex roles. This programme was largely taught on an evening and was term time only. Teaching sessions were provided in a post-1992 university located in the North of England. The institution had a relatively small student population, with just over 6500 learners studying on campus. Throughout the period that the research was undertaken, over two thirds of the university’s students were female. The university was a very well

established, respected and large provider of primary teacher education. Black and minority ethnic students were under-represented in the student body.

In-depth interviews were conducted over a period of three years. Data was collected from fifty-six interviewees who were teaching assistants and Foundation degree students. Initially eight group interviews were conducted. In this stage of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty-four volunteers. In addition to group interviews, 12 individual in-depth follow up interviews were carried out in to gain further detail of and validate emerging themes. Again, these adopted a semi-structured approach. The findings that are reported in this article emerged when students were questioned about their motivations for study.

Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and just over two hours. Although interviewing was the principal source of data, the study also included participant observation and analysis of course-related documents. Fourteen modules were observed between 2008 and 2012. Throughout the period of data collection documents including class lists, National Student Survey data, Head of Programme interview records, programme validation documents and timetable information were also analysed. Data from these sources was particularly useful in providing evidence that could be drawn upon to confirm and challenge the accounts that interviewees provided. For example, when student interviewees claimed that their decisions to study had primarily stemmed from a desire to career-switch, their accounts were compared to records of selection interviews that all aspiring Foundation degree students were required to participate in before entering the University. These recorded their motivations for Foundation degree study.

The academic award that the research participants were studying for was part of a portfolio of work-related courses. It was offered by the university where I was

employed. Therefore, the investigation that was undertaken could be classified as insider research (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014; Wellington, 2015). I was a tutor on the Foundation programme that the teaching assistants were studying. Moreover, for part of the data collection period, I also held the post of Head of Programme for Foundation degrees. Consequently, throughout my research I reflected upon issues related to positionality and the power differentials that inevitably existed between myself and those that I aimed to study.

The social position that I had in relation to the research's participants both as a Head of Programme and module tutor generated challenges and dilemmas. Like Stern (2014) who studied his own academics whilst a dean, I was concerned that my positionality to interviewees could have influenced their responses. When discussing programme related issues, would students limit their comments to ones that were positive in their nature? Although it was recognised that such potential bias could not be fully eliminated, strategies were undertaken to mitigate against it.

All research participants were informed that the investigation aimed to gain a full, critical and honest account of their experiences. This desire was stressed in briefing sheets, letters of consent and preambles that the students received before commencing interviews. Wherever possible when responses were suspected as having been influenced by my occupational role, these were checked against other contextualising data from documentary analysis and records of classroom observations. Students were also informed that any research findings would be anonymously presented. While this strategy did not offer the possibility of minimising students' reactions to the position that I occupied as tutor and Head of Programme, it may have reduced reluctance to provide critical insights. Participants were also informed that I would not be sharing the research's findings directly with their workplace mentors.

Member checking and peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba 1985) were also used to enhance the trustworthiness (Shenton 2004) of the research. Member-checking involved asking small groups of students to comment upon the emerging codes, themes and hypothesis. This process was also undertaken by conducting individual interviews after group ones had been conducted. These focused upon offering Foundation degree students an opportunity to provide their views of the likely validity of the study's key emergent findings. Peer debriefing was carried out by presenting the research's central findings at an international education conference. Here useful and challenging feedback was accessed. This process was consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985, 30) conception of peer debriefing in which the researcher exposes "oneself to a disinterested peer[s] in a manner paralleling an analytical session."

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1978) was undertaken to make sense of interview data. Emerging codes were reduced to core themes. Data analysis was carried out throughout the study and involved a relatively complex process of shifting between description and analysis; alongside abductive and retroductive reasoning. Data from participant observations and analysis of programme-related documentary materials were also thematically analysed. Participants for group and individual interviews were accessed by utilising what is commonly termed "purposive sampling" (Richie et al. 2014).

[INSERT Table 1 here]

The observed teaching sessions and course related documentation were also selected purposively. First and second year modules were observed. The British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004 2011) were adhered to throughout the study. Students were informed that taking part in the research was

voluntary and that I would not observe any sessions that they objected to. Such objections could be emailed to their personal tutors who would pass on their concerns anonymously to me. Interviews were only conducted with students who volunteered to take part in the research. Volunteers were sought after the student body had been initially briefed about the nature and intended aims of the investigation.

Findings

The second part of this article discusses the research's key findings related to the reasons that the teaching assistants had for participating in Foundation degree study. These broadly concerned: a reaction to role stretch in their workplaces, repair of a previously damaged academic self-concept and constraints around the type of study that they could practically participate in.

Role stretch, a lack of access to capital and the shattering of illusion

Interviewees overwhelmingly suggested that studying for a vocationally-related degree did not generally reflect a longer-term ambition to sustain their present occupational positions. Conversely, study was frequently linked to achieving a "better" and other occupational existence. There was no indication that most of the teaching assistants had been motivated to study by a belief that their level of skill was inadequate to perform increasingly challenging workplace roles. There was however an acknowledgement that their workplace experiences had provided an impetus for a return to study. Students' desire for a change of career and their subsequent participation in higher education was linked to modified workplace conditions. They often claimed to have experienced considerable role and identity change, which had ultimately pushed them to seek career change.

It [*being a teaching assistant*] has changed. When I started, we only got involved in supporting teachers through doing photocopying, mounting and reading. It then started that we were supporting the lower ability children outside class. Nowadays, we are sort of mini teachers. You have to assess, teach and you are assessed on whether you are achieving your goals. In comparison to when I started twelve years ago, being a teaching assistant has changed a lot. (Gill's group interview response)

It's changed. I've gone from photocopying and displays and now it's a lot more hands on learning with the children. I'm more accountable for learning than I was and I have to carry out assessments of the children who I care for, which before the teachers would have done. We're now more like a team. (Rosie's group interview response)

Mansaray (2006) has previously found that the descriptions that some teaching assistants offer of their work stress a liminal experience which incorporates significant elements of a teachers' duties, but does not fully encompass these or a teaching identity. They therefore operate on the boundaries or margins of the traditional teacher role. This discursive framing of their work with its emphasis on its "ambiguity" is regarded as being reflective of their liminal positions. Teaching assistants' conceptions of being a "mini" teacher was therefore deemed to be "a spatial metaphor of similarity and difference, which reveal the tensions and boundaries that are re-enacted in daily practices" (Mansaray 2006, 178).

The teaching assistants who were studied in the research that is outlined in this article, frequently claimed that greater involvement in leading learning activities had initially been intrinsically satisfying and that they had initially been optimistic that workplace change would allow them to access other improved economic returns for their labours. However, these hopes had routinely been left unfilled. In turn, this had encouraged them to aspire to a change of career via participation in higher education. Jennifer's account was typical of narratives which linked inequitable access to economic capital, study and occupational escape:

I'm just a general teaching assistant. Yeah though I seem to, because we're in a real small setting erm like today I've taken the Foundation Stage children all day today and I've got them tomorrow and Tuesday, so I'm to be honest cheap cover most of the time. It's very annoying sometimes. I've just got to live with it until I get to where else I want to be. It does make you fed up when you actually think about what you do. You do sometimes think it's not long-term. Coming on the course was my tunnel. (Group interview response)

Concern was also expressed about the lack of social prestige or symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) that being a teaching assistant continued to offer. For Bourdieu (1993, 7) symbolic capital has been categorised as the "degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*).” Whilst some improvement in esteem was deemed to have taken place over the years, its level of appropriateness was questioned:

Mel: It's [*being a teaching assistant*] still not highly thought of as it should be and the pay is still very poor for what you do. You do it for the kids. You wouldn't do it for the money. Tesco erm pays more [*laughs*].

Erin: I think that it's more than it was.

Mel: Yeah I agree definitely, but I still think that people who aren't involved in school life don't appreciate how much a TA does. They think you are just a helper really a nobody.

Erin: Yeah, a mum's helper. People who aren't in education think that's what only what we do. Senior managers see us as ten a penny and someone will always do it. (Group interview response)

Inequitable distribution of access to social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) was also highlighted in several of the group and individual interviews. There was a common feeling amongst the teaching assistants that whilst some of the individual teachers that they worked closely with had encouraged them to attend planning and sometimes case meetings, role extension had not provided them with access to other important social networks. Many of the teaching assistants, for instance, suggested that they had continued to experience limited contact and dialogue with senior managers. Kirsten explained:

My classroom teacher has been really good at including me in things like planning. She's really supportive, but I never see my head. We aren't really actually involved in whole school discussions and things like staff development.

Our SLT don't take much notice of us or get involved with us until they have something to tell us to do. (Individual interview response).

The pay and conditions that a qualified teaching role offered was often regarded as preferable to those experienced by teaching assistants, even though the stresses and challenges of being a teacher were acknowledged. Many of the interviewees' accounts highlighted the different levels of symbolic and economic capital that being a teacher and teaching assistant conferred. It also led to a number to aspire to eventually gaining qualified teacher status. For many students, such career aspirations had partially attracted them to the subject area of education. Jo outlined: "I hope to be in a better paid teacher's job making a difference to other people's lives and just being seen as a bit more" (group interview response). Rachel also outlined: "Coming to the Fd was mainly about getting stable teaching job which I could enjoy and which will help me to give my children things, material things, holidays and quality time" (group interview response).

Several students offered accounts that explicitly highlighted the differing economic rewards that teachers and teaching assistants received for their work: "We [*teaching* assistants] get paid peanuts and a teachers' salary is very attractive compared to what we get" (Jan's individual interview response). Other students such as Dawn linked their aspirations to become teachers to gaining access to enhanced economic and symbolic capital:

I hope in five years' time I will be a fully qualified class teacher inspiring many children to learn. As you know, I am planning lessons now and teaching regularly so, I look forward to being paid more and also having the respect that qualified teachers get. (Dawn's individual interview response)

Students who were volunteer teaching assistants offered a slightly different view. These learners frequently claimed that they were hoping to improve their chances of securing a paid position as a teaching assistant. Yet, even these students frequently aspired to a non-teaching assistant career in the longer-term.

The disjuncture between the teaching assistants' expectations for remuneration and their lived experiences can be regarded as having generated a "shattering" (Colley 2012) of their illusion or commitment to the teaching assistant game. The adjustment of career outlooks was often identified as having been the spur to enter higher education, which they also believed would allow them to improve previously spoilt academic self-concepts (Rodriguez 2009). Previous harmful interactions with educational institutions, especially in schools when they were children, were connected to an ambition to acquire an enhanced sense of being academically capable. Georgie, for example claimed that recommencing study had partly been a way to confront her "educational demons". Christina explained that such needs were not untypical amongst her peers and related this to a desire to establish an improved self-concept:

When we talk to one another, we all seem to have the same sort of thing. We are generally a group of women who have underachieved [*educationally*] earlier in life erm who haven't had the opportunity to, but are capable of doing it and are maybe a bit frustrated in that way and want to make the most of ourselves and who've had this opportunity later in life like it does for a lot of people and erm and this is our chance to show what we're capable of. For ourselves and others in our lives. (Individual interview response)

Whilst enhancement of the self-concept was an important element in many of the accounts that the Foundation degree students provided, the inter-related perception of how others perceived them was also a key imperative. The importance of this outcome was evident in Christina's account and those of other students. Gaining prestige or symbolic capital through being successful higher education student can be viewed as being part of this process. The desire for enhancement of the personal self has been previously identified as a key attractor for mature female students who decided to enter non-vocational higher education (Bainbridge 2005; Merrill 2015; Reay 2003; Shafi and Rose 2014; Stone 2008; Walters 2000). Many of those who were interviewed, for the study that is explored in this article, therefore expressed views that were not always dissimilar to those that have captured by researchers who have studied other types of mature undergraduates.

Constraints and choosing to enter accessible vocationally-related higher education

Alongside the view that their entry to study had been motivated by occupational and identity change, there was a strong opinion that Foundation degree study had been attractive as it had offered the possibility of maintaining established roles and personas. For many of the students, these included being a teaching assistant and a mother. Although such concerns were not portrayed as being primary motivators for study, they often structured decisions about the form of higher education that students opted for.

All types of students, apart from the very small number who were school volunteers, linked to a short-term economic need to preserve their employment as teaching assistants whilst they studied. Anna's explanation of the decision-making behind her course choice was representative of those provided by other students when she

explained: “I couldn’t have quit work and do a degree. I just couldn’t have afforded to do it, especially with kids” (group interview response). Comparably, Dawn explained:

I was told about it by my head teacher. It had been posted through to school and my head teacher knew that I wanted to expand my career and I was working as a HTLA. I’d spoken about doing degrees in the past but couldn’t afford to give up my job so this was perfect as it was all work-based and I only needed to come out once every half-term and on evenings so she gave me full support. (Individual interview response)

In addition to the preservation of employment, large numbers of student-mothers associated their specific decision to enter Foundation degree study with a programme of study that “fitted” with childcare responsibilities was regularly stressed by these learners.

Julie: My mum looks after my kids when I come here. It is only three hours on a night.

Interviewer: Did this influence you deciding to enrol?

Julie: Erm I would say so. My mum’s a wee bit older now. She can do a night looking after them while I am here. It’s good that we don’t have to be here in the school holidays. It’s a struggle for me but how it works is good. For me it made things possible, to follow my dream of teaching. (Group interview response)

The relatively open access that the Foundation degree offered to students without formal Advanced level qualifications had also made it an appealing option. Half of those who contributed to individual interviews acknowledged this practicality. Betty stated that the Foundation degree had been an attractive as it had allowed her to overcome the barrier of not possessing formal qualifications:

Being practical I did need to find a course that didn't need much. At first, I did think that I wouldn't have what was needed to come to university. That was my understanding from school and watching my own children. One of my colleagues Ruth Sweet was doing this and told me about it and it seemed a way to do it. When Rab interviewed me he said I had what I needed to start. (Individual interview response)

Programme statistics relating to students' on-entry qualifications indicated that over a four-year period, more than 60% of students had accessed the Foundation degree without the qualifications that are ordinarily required for admission to undergraduate study at UK universities. In Bourdieusian terms, such learners lacked the cultural capital to enter other higher educational spaces, some of which would potentially have bestowed greater symbolic capital.

Discussion

The research that is presented in this article raises several issues specifically related to teaching assistants' engagement with Higher Vocational Education (HiVE) and their working lives more generally. These in turn, have policy implications related to the

continued expansion in teaching assistant numbers, role stretch and the provision of higher education programmes that have aimed to respond to these changes.

Overwhelmingly, the Foundation degree students presented outlooks that were in opposition to those that were initially presented by policy-makers. The students rejected the policy assumption that participation in such learning would primarily be utilised to remedy skill deficiencies, which in turn would enable them to maintain their existing careers as teaching assistants. There was a paradox where higher education provision that had principally been developed to upskill the teaching assistant workforce, was often conceived by the learners who engaged with it as a way of moving on from this occupational grouping. The lack, or even the future prospect, of adequate reward for extended workplace duties was often identified as having been the “turning point” (Raggl and Troman 2008) that had encouraged them to enter higher education. Being unable to obtain appropriate levels of capital was linked to a feeling of unsettledness (Morrin 2015) within the workplace. Such viewpoints had prompted many of them to seek career change which they believed entry to higher education would eventually facilitate. One important implication of this scenario is that paraprofessional groups such as teaching assistants should be able to access relatively broad higher education curriculums that are suitable for aspiring career switchers.

The study’s findings challenge previous smaller scale research which has asserted that educational paraprofessionals access Foundation degree study for professional development reasons, related to supporting their existing occupational roles (Tierney and Slack 2005). Indeed, it partially endorses studies which claim that such learners are often motivated by a medium-term aspiration of career change to access increased economic rewards for their labours (Morris 2010; Penketh and Goddard 2008). However, the accounts that were captured also indicated that it is not just the frustration with economic

capital, but also an annoyance with a lack of access to other forms of reward that propels teaching assistants towards higher education. This includes inequitable access to social, cultural and symbolic capital.

The research data also illustrates that occupational change was not the only modification that this group of higher vocational learners aspired to. Productively, negative workplace experiences had encouraged many of the sample to address an existing concern about their capacity to be successful learners and therefore gain a positive academic self-concept (Rodriguez 2009). In this respect their motives for study were similar those that have been identified amongst other mature students who pursue traditional undergraduate degrees (Shafi and Rose, 2014; Walters, 2000). Whilst to some extent being distinct from their academic peers, higher education institutions should not ignore the ways that vocational students have similar needs and aspirations to other mature students.

Somewhat surprisingly, many of the students' accounts indicated that most held a habitus that included a strong notion of being an assistant or "mini" teacher. There is consequently a suggestion that these workers are developing a hybrid identity which incorporates elements of being a teacher and teaching assistant. Many of the interviewees offered narratives which included a strong sense that they had moved beyond being an educational support worker, but have not become teachers. These feelings existed in the accounts of Higher Level Assistants (HLTAs) and General Teaching Assistants (GTAs). There was no evidence to interviewees holding what has been identified as a "go-between" identity (Lehane 2016), where teaching assistants principally view themselves as a conduit between pupils and teachers. This finding is comparable to Mansaray's (2006) analysis which also established that the contemporary teaching assistant role is

one that is characterised by liminality and involves being on the threshold and margins of the teaching profession, whilst being denied full membership.

Despite governmental reassurances at the outset of the remodelling teachers and teaching assistants' roles in English schools, there was a perception that those without Higher Level Teaching Assistant status are also now carrying out duties that have traditionally been the preserve of teachers. Many of the accounts in this article indicate that not only are the role and identity lines between teachers and Higher Level Teaching Assistants becoming blurred as scholars have previously claimed (Bach, Kessler, and Heron 2006), but those between HLTAs and their general counterparts are also in some respects increasingly unclear.

In contrast to previous analysis into teaching assistants' motives for study, this article employs the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu to make sense of their decision-making. In doing so, this study therefore supports the claim that Bourdieusian theory can be productive for researchers as they investigate the lived experiences of paraprofessional groups (Colley 2012; Colley and Guéry 2015). It also follows the lead of Woolhouse et al. who deployed Bourdieu's (1984; 1990; 2000) theory of capital to analyse the eventual gains that teaching assistants achieve at the end of Foundation degree study. The research that is discussed in this article indicates that Bourdieu's (1984; 1990; 2000) concepts of capital, habitus, field and *illusio* can be usefully drawn upon to provide an enhanced theoretical understanding of teaching assistants' lives and aspirations. Drawing upon the thoughts of Bourdieu (1984, 370), it can be argued that many interviewees had realised that their "dream of social flying" and an acquisition of capital was unlikely to be achieved in their present workplace roles. Their experiences in the field of the workplace had splintered their *illusio* for the teaching assistant game. The choice of which form of

higher education they could participate in to achieve eventual occupational escape were however often structure by their positioning in the home and the workplace.

The students' accounts that are presented also illustrate the impact that workplace variation can have on habitus. Heightened awareness of exploitation brought about by role stretch can be viewed as having inspired the teaching assistants to reflect upon aspects of the "habit, or unthinking-ness" (Mills 2008, 80) of their working situations. Bourdieu (2000) himself stressed the changeability of habitus as positions and conflicts within fields become modified. For Bourdieu (1984; 1990) habitus is analogous to fields, in that it has the potential to shift as individuals engage in social interactions (Reay 2004). He therefore does not, as one critic has suggested (Jenkins 1982), offer a purely determinist view. One outcome of such change is that: "People can find that their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social position they find themselves" (Bourdieu 2000, 19). The findings presented support this proposition. Nevertheless, scholars should be mindful of important weaknesses in Bourdieu's work. These include a lack of empirical data that he offers to support some of his key argument, the relative lack of awareness of gender differences and his emphasis on failing to acknowledge that factors beyond cost-benefit analysis structure human action (Delamont, Nash and Apple 1993).

The lack of reward that the teaching assistants had experienced as part of their employment might however be regarded as rather unsurprising, as historically they have occupied positions within schools that provide limited power to negotiate and accrue appropriate levels of capital. This positionality is deeply embedded within school cultures. Moreover, as a particularly feminised segment of the working class it could be argued that they suffer from the lack of negotiating power due to their classed and gendered positions (Moyle and Suschitzky, 1997; Hancock et al. 2002). Indeed, the

experiences of teaching assistants can be considered as being symbolic the broader occupational experiences of working class women's lives, where inequities and precariousness have been recognised as predominant features (Platt 2011).

There are several policy implications that flow from the findings and analysis that have been discussed. Firstly, role extension amongst teaching assistants which is not accompanied by increased access to a range of capitals (Bourdieu 1986) is likely to generate issues of low morale these amongst workers. This article also raises questions about what consequences that might occur as in-service higher vocational education is accessed by increasing numbers of teaching assistants. As these workers acquire additional qualifications they may not be retained within the teaching assistant workforce; if they can access alternative roles that provide greater rewards. On other hand, if teaching assistants who engage in higher level study find that their qualifications do not allow them to access other employment fields, they may become increasingly frustrated with their work. This potential outcome is very important, as children who experience the greatest social disadvantages are increasingly reliant on teaching assistants (Devecchi et al. 2012).

Longitudinal research has suggested that teaching assistants who successfully acquire Foundation degrees continue in their present roles after graduation, with little reward for their efforts (Dunne, Goddard and Woolhouse 2009). Like many vocationally-related programmes of study outside elite areas of knowledge such as medicine and engineering (Billett 2014), Foundation degrees in non-technical subjects have been found to bestow limited levels of societal esteem and provide little material advantage (Robinson 2012). Potentially progression to honours level study and eventually the teaching profession might allow Foundation degree graduate teaching assistants to accrue greater rewards for their efforts. There is however no readily accessible large-scale statistical data on the eventual career destinations of such learners, especially in relation

to how many of them ultimately enter the teaching profession. Further research in this area would therefore enhance understanding of teaching assistant experiences of Foundation degree study.

The analysis that is offered also illustrates the importance that economic and domestic constraints can have on the forms of higher education that “second chance” learners decide to follow. Possession of insignificant levels of economic capital, the pressures of motherhood and limited levels of academic qualifications (cultural capital) are recognised as key restrictions that some vocational learners experience. The designers of in-service higher vocational education and traditional undergraduate degrees should address these constraints and take them into account when they devise and validate such provision. As continuing agents in the fields of employment and family life, many of the Foundation degree students were subjected to the inequitable regulatory principles that flowed from their social positioning within these social spaces. This illustrates the importance of Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992, 16) notion that social life involves individuals navigating a series of interlocking fields in sets “of historical relations between positions anchored in various forms of power (or capital).”

Conclusion

This article has outlined the worth of drawing upon Bourdieu’s key concepts of capital, field, habitus and *illusio* to explain why some teaching assistants decide to follow work-related Foundation degrees. Many of the teaching assistants whose views were captured, had initially been optimistic about changes to their workplace roles. This positivity had however been replaced by a realisation that such optimism had been misplaced. As part of this change, their habitus had been modified and their commitment to (*illusio*) the teaching assistant game had been undermined. Gaining further qualifications (cultural

capital) provided new hope that they could escape from their current workplace positions. This result was far from the one that Foundation degree policy makers had originally intended. Few students were motivated by the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills related to their current teaching assistant role. Their options for further study had though been frequently constrained by their positions in the fields of employment and family life.

The key findings of this study have implications for continuing international expansion of teaching assistant numbers and the roles that these paraprofessionals undertake. Markedly they indicate that the extension of roles and responsibilities must be accompanied by a wide range of rewards, if motivated workforces are to be maintained and retained. Moreover, higher education providers who offer provision aimed at paraprofessionals should also avoid making assumptions about their preferred futures, if they are to meet the needs of their learners.

Words: 7994 (including title, abstract and key words)

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I would add my own comment, which is to ask you to reflect on the benefits or explanatory offerings which emerge from a Bourdieusian analysis. Sometimes I feel that the theoretical theme in papers such as this is an overlay - overlain because authors think that this is what they have to do in an academic journal. The theoretical overlay doesn't necessarily enable better or richer explanation - it sometimes seems to work just as a screen which may in fact occlude the points wanting/needing to be made. Perhaps you could play down/summarise/precis the Bourdieu stuff, or at least be critical about its offering, as you are at one or two points. **This was useful and interesting advice for this piece and my writings going forward. The section on Bourdieu removed and summarised part of this text have been integrated into other sections. It is hoped that this allows the key points to come more to the fore. Critical points added to discussion. I did however wish to retain the piece's theoretical focus partly because as the reviewer noted there is little literature of this type on the subject. Just a thought. I'll leave it to you. (Btw, is the accepted form Bourdieusian or Bourdieuan?) Both these terms are used in the literature, but more contemporary high profile papers employ the term Boudieusian. This is why I adopted it for the paper.**

Referee(s)' Comments to Author:

Referee: 1

Comments to the Author

I really liked this paper and it is very good to see the theoretical analysis of a familiar context. Writing is lively and clear and the context is well-explained and developed.

1. Could add value to have some comments on p.2 about the non-mandatory and non-statutory status of the 'Professional Standards for Teaching Assistants' (2016) <http://www.naht.org.uk/welcome/news-and-media/key-topics/staff-management/professional-standards-for-teaching-assistants-published/>. **This was added to page 2.** In a similar vein, maybe indicate (with a phrase) that the National Agreement (p.6) no longer exists? **Sentence added to acknowledge this point.** Similarly, a word about the current context of deregulation, academisation etc. This all seems relevant to the weakened sense of career coherence for TAs. **Text added to the top of page three.**
2. Perhaps further develop the discussion about TAs and liminality and TAs operating at the boundaries / margins in various ways. Participant Gill refers to 'mini' teachers on your p.15. Worth a look at the work of Ayo Mansaray: Mansaray, A.A., (2006), Liminality and In / Exclusion: Exploring the Work of Teaching Assistants, Pedagogy, Culture and Society, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 171 – 187. Worth considering anyway but the word 'mini' was also used in an interesting way by one of his participants (on p.178 of the article). Maybe link to your p.15 and/or p. 23? **Paragraph added to page 15. Links have also been made to Mansaray's work on page 25.**
3. It might be interesting to comment on any statistics that do (or do not!) exist on the subsequent career paths taken by FdA graduate TAs. How many of them do stay as TAs or become teachers? **Sentences added to discuss this is issues on pages 26 and 27.**
4. I am not sure that nurse practitioners (or early years educators) are associate professionals (p.44). Nurses are professionals in their own right. I would suggest physician associates and health care assistants would be better examples within the health field. **Nurse practitioners and early years educators were deleted and replaced with physician associates and health care assistants on page 4.**

5. I'd suggest use of levels 4 and 5 rather than 1 and 2 (using National Qualifications framework) at end of p.6. **These were changed to reflect the reviewer's advice.**
6. Explain what is meant by 'member checking' and 'peer debriefing' in this research. What actually happened? **Further details of these strategies were added to page 16.** Perhaps, too, a few words about how the writer's students could (in practice) refuse consent to participate. **A discussion of this was added to page 15.** Cite BERA ethical guidelines 2011 as well as the 2004 version? **2011 reference added on page 15.**
7. I think 'illusio' needs a straightforward explanation on first use. **Discussed on page 8 where it is initially drawn upon for analysis.**
8. Clear heading needed for start of 'findings' section? If possible, squeeze some more data into section as they are very interesting. **A heading and introductory paragraph has been included on page 15.**

Minor typos etc:

Some repetition of the point about TA numbers and gender on pp.1-2 and 4?

Information has been removed from pp. 1-2.

Missing word line 51, p. 22 (similar to those)? **'By' deleted to make the sentence sentence.**

Sentence construction check: last sentence of first paragraph p.3. **Sentence rewritten**

Missing word in line 37 p. 7 ('briefly refers to')? **'to' added to the sentence**

Wording of penultimate sentence paragraph 2, p.12. **Sentence divided into two and wording amended**

Missing word line 28 p. 22? **This sentence has been amended**

Extra data squeezed in on pages 16, 17, 18, 20